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#2

ZOMBIES

XOMBIES
OF
FROZEN SOULS

xombies of frozen souls

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Mead Hall Media

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Xombies of Frozen Souls

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The microwave groaned, its tired hum rattling through Derek Lawson's cramped cabin as the frost melted sluggishly from the rock-hard lasagna. He leaned against the counter, arms crossed, watching the cheap rotating plate with the same dull resignation he'd given most of his meals since moving to Frosthaven.

Outside, the generator wheezed like a consumptive elder, its erratic pulse a dirge of imminent failure. Snow pressed against the windows in suffocating drifts, transforming the cabin into a tomb of isolation. "Dinner's served," Derek muttered, the words crystallizing mid-air before they could fully escape his lips. His breath unfurled like spectral tendrils, a ghostly testament to the space heater's pathetic resistance against the encroaching cold.

The lasagna continued its lazy spin, still partially frozen in the center, while the edges began to bubble and pop like tiny geysers in the scratched plastic container. He'd found the meal buried deep in his freezer, a forgotten remnant from his last supply run three weeks ago when the town's only general store still bothered to stock frozen dinners. These days, even the store's shelves stood as empty and forsaken as the rest of Frosthaven.

The microwave dinged with a hollow, metallic sound. Derek stabbed at the half-frozen dinner, the plastic fork's tines buckling against a solid ice core. Each bite was a testament to survival—cardboard-dry and crusted with freezer burn, this meal whispered of desperation more than sustenance. This tasteless ritual was better than battling the waist-deep snow outside, hoping the ghost of a general store might have miraculously restocked its barren shelves.

A sharp crack echoed from outside - another pipe frozen and

burst in one of the vacant cabins. Derek pushed his meal aside and pulled on his heavy work coat, the familiar weight of tools already filling its pockets. The wind howled through gaps in the window frames as he grabbed his tool belt and flashlight.

"Third one this week." He shrugged into thick boots and stepped out into the darkness. His boots crunched through the fresh powder as he descended the empty street. Frosthaven lived up to its name, the abandoned buildings looming like ice-covered tombstones in the pale moonlight.

The Marshall cabin's front door creaked open at his touch, releasing ice crystals from the frame. His flashlight caught the spreading pool of water in the kitchen, which had already frozen into a slick sheet across the warped floorboards. The copper pipe beneath the sink had split open, crystallizing the water into delicate frozen streams.

Derek's knuckles scraped against the rough wood as he worked in the tight space, muscle memory guiding his hands through the familiar motions of cutting and replacing the section of pipe. The metal fittings burned cold against his skin, but he barely noticed anymore. This was his routine now - maintaining a ghost town that refused to die completely, one broken piece at a time.

The pipe fixed, and he swept his flashlight around the kitchen. Water damage had bubbled the wallpaper, adding new stains to the faded pattern. Like everything else in Frosthaven, the cabin slowly decayed despite his best efforts to hold it together.



Derek noticed something odd about the familiar silhouette of the Cryslix Glacier through his cabin window the next morning. The massive ice formation that had dominated the valley's eastern edge for generations looked different—softer somehow; its razor-edged edges dulled against the pale sky.

He grabbed his binoculars from the shelf and focused on the

glacier's face. Dark water trickled down its crystalline surface, carving channels through centuries of accumulated ice. The sight made his stomach clench. Even during the warmest summers, the CrysaliX had remained solid as stone, its jagged peaks catching the sun like polished glass.

"That's not right." Derek pulled on his coat and boots, grabbed his pack, and headed outside. Despite the deep snow, the morning air felt strangely mild, lacking its usual bitter bite.

Steam rose from the glacier's base as he approached, curling up its face like phantom fingers. A steady stream of meltwater cut through the snow at his feet, the runoff forming pools in the valley below. The sound of cracking ice echoed across the empty landscape - sharp reports like gunshots that made him flinch.

A massive fissure had opened near the glacier's foundation, dark water gushing from its depths. Heat radiated from the crack, strong enough that Derek could feel it on his face from yards away. He edged closer, careful of the unstable ground. The crevasse glowed with an eerie orange light, suggesting some underground thermal source had awakened beneath the ancient ice.

"Hell of a time for a hot spring." Derek backed away as another crack spiderwebbed across the glacier's surface. More water poured from the widening fissure, steam billowing up in thick clouds that obscured the morning sun. The CrysaliX was melting faster than any natural thaw could explain, its crystalline surface dissolving like sugar in hot coffee.

The snow around his boots had already turned to slush, forcing him to retreat as the meltwater flow increased. Whatever force had awakened beneath the glacier was frighteningly transforming the landscape.

The afternoon sun cast long shadows across Derek's cabin porch as he documented the glacier's accelerating melt in his logbook. A wolf's howl pierced the air - too close for comfort. He peered over his notebook to scan the tree line.

Three wolves emerged from the forest's edge, their fur matted

with patches of frost despite the unseasonable warmth. Their movements looked wrong - jerky and uncoordinated. Ice crystals glinted along their flanks, catching the sunlight.

"What the hell happened to you?" Derek stood slowly, backing toward his door.

More wolves slunk from the shadows—at least eight now. Their eyes reflected an unnatural blue sheen, and their breath came out in visible plumes despite the warm air. The lead wolf's muzzle bore thick ice crusts, and its lips pulled back in a snarl.

The attack came without warning. The pack surged forward as one, their frost-rimed fur bristling. Derek dove through his door, slamming it shut as bodies thudded against the wood—savage growls and scratching filled the air.

A shadow passed over the cabin's windows, then another, and another. Derek's eyes widened as he saw dozens of ravens descending, their wings encased in crystalline sheaths that should have made flight impossible. They landed on his roof with heavy thuds, their calls distorted and hollow.

The birds began hammering at his shutters with ice-covered beaks while the wolves continued assaulting the door. Through a gap in the window boards, Derek watched more ravens spiral down from the sky, their feathers crackling with frost. They moved like a single dark cloud, blotting out the sun.

"This isn't right." Derek grabbed his rifle above the fireplace, shaking his hands as he checked the ammunition. The wolves' howls had become almost metallic, like wind through ice caves. More ravens landed, their combined weight making the roof timbers groan. The temperature inside the cabin began to drop, and frost spread across the interior walls despite the roaring fireplace.

Two days later, the relentless assault on his cabin finally subsided. An unnerving silence settled over Frosthaven, broken only by the drip of melting ice from the eaves. Derek cautiously opened the door, rifle raised. Ravens lay scattered across the snow,

frozen solid. The wolves were gone. The air, however, bit with a cold unlike any he'd ever felt. It seemed to seep into his bones, numbing his fingers and toes despite his heavy gloves and boots.

He glanced at the CrysaliX Glacier. Although the melting had slowed, the unnatural orange glow still pulsed from the fissure. The surrounding landscape was coated in a thick layer of frost, and the trees glittered like glass sculptures.

"Something's twisted up out there." He decided to investigate.

The valley floor crunched under his boots as he approached the glacier. The unnatural chill intensified with every step, and the air shimmered with an almost visible coldness, distorting the landscape.

Back at his cabin, Derek discovered another anomaly. His generator, which he'd left running, was encased in a thick ice shell. The engine, still whirring beneath the frozen layer, sputtered and died.

"Damn it." He kicked at the ice, frustration building. He needed the generator for heat, for light. For survival. He'd have to head into Frosthaven for supplies and try to salvage another generator from one of the abandoned houses.

The town felt colder than the wilderness. A thick fog clung to the deserted streets, obscuring the skeletal outlines of the buildings. Ice coated every surface, transforming the familiar landscape into something alien and hostile.

He reached the general store, its windows frosted over. He tried the door. Locked. He peered inside, seeing shelves lined with canned goods and other supplies—all frozen solid. He slammed his shoulder against the door, the wood groaning under the impact. He tried again, putting his full weight behind it. The lock held.

"Not good," he mumbled, his breath solidifying in the cold. He walked to the hardware store, his boots crushing the frost-covered street. The once inviting red and white sign now appeared unfriendly, just like everything else in Frosthaven. He hoped to find what he needed to survive the strange disaster, but the

relentless cold made him doubt his chances.



Derek picked through broken glass and stepped into Anderson's Hardware. His flashlight beam cut through the darkness, revealing shelves of tools dusted with frost. The beam caught something in the back office—a human shape slumped over the desk.

"Hello?" His voice echoed. No response.

He recognized Hannah's blue research jacket, her long dark hair frozen in crystalline strands. She sat motionless, head down, a layer of frost coating her entire body.

"Hannah?" Derek approached cautiously. "Dr. Mitchell?"

Her head snapped up with a crackling sound. Frost fell from her face in sheets, revealing skin bleached white as snow. Her eyes opened - solid blue orbs that gleamed like glacial ice.

Derek stumbled backward. Hannah's movements were wrong - her joints popping and cracking as she rose. Ice crystals spread from her fingertips as she reached for him.

The bell above the door chimed. Tom, the local mechanic, stepped inside.

"Derek? You in here? Power's out at the garage-"

"Tom, get out!"

Hannah's head rotated toward Tom with mechanical precision. In a blur of motion, she crossed the distance between them. Her frozen hand clamped onto Tom's arm.

Tom screamed as frost spread rapidly from the point of contact, crawling up his sleeve and chest. He tried to pull away, but Hannah's grip was firm, her strength inhuman.

Derek grabbed a crowbar from a nearby shelf and swung it at Hannah's arm. The frozen limb shattered like glass, releasing Tom. But it was too late - ice already covered most of his body, and his movements grew sluggish.

"Run!" Derek shoved Tom toward the door. They burst out into

the street together, but Tom stumbled and fell. Frost consumed him completely as Derek watched in horror.

Behind them, Hannah emerged from the hardware store, moving in sharp, jerky motions. Her shattered arm was already reforming, ice crystals building a new limb.

Derek ran.

Derek's boots crunched through fresh snow as he sprinted down Main Street. Behind him, more screams erupted from different directions. Through the hardware store's windows, he glimpsed Tom rising with those same glacial eyes.

A truck skidded around the corner, tires spinning. Mary from the diner sat behind the wheel, her teenage son Jimmy pressed against the passenger window.

"Get in!" She threw open the rear door.

Derek dove into the backseat. The truck fishtailed as Mary accelerated.

"They got Tom from the gas station." Jimmy's breath fogged the window. "Just touched him, and he... he turned into one of them."

Through the rearview mirror, Derek spotted Hannah and Tom walking unnaturally, leaving frost trails in their wake. More figures emerged from buildings, all moving with those same broken motions.

"The school," Mary's knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. "We need to get the kids."

They rounded the corner to find parents frantically loading children into cars. Principal Edwards waved them toward safety, but frost already crept up his legs.

"No, don't touch them!" Derek shouted as Edwards reached for a young girl. It was too late. The frost spread from his hand to her jacket, and her mother screamed.

The truck's thermometer dropped rapidly. Ice crystals formed on the windshield despite the heater blasting.

"The air." Derek pulled his shirt over his mouth. "It's in the air now."

They passed the Sullivan house where old Jack had barricaded his windows with plywood. Next door, the Peterson family huddled in their garage, hammering boards across the entrance.

"The community center," Mary said. "It has a backup generator, supplies-"

Her words cut off as something slammed into the truck's side. They spun out, hitting a lamppost. Through cracked glass, Derek saw dozens of frost-covered figures converging on them, their movements synchronized like a frozen hive mind.

The temperature plummeted. Ice spread across the truck's windows, sealing them in.

The truck's windows shattered inward. Hannah's ice-covered arm punched through, grabbing Mary's shoulder. Frost spread across Mary's jacket, her skin, and her hair.

"Mom!" Jimmy reached for her.

"Don't touch her!" Derek yanked Jimmy back, but the boy's fingers had already brushed his mother's sleeve.

Mary's eyes crystallized to a glacial blue. Seconds later, Jimmy's followed, his terrified expression freezing into place. They turned toward Derek with synchronized precision.

Derek kicked open the rear door and tumbled into the snow. More infected townspeople approached from all directions—the Hendersons from the post office, Dr. Carter from the clinic, and the Wilson twins. Their movements clicked and crackled like breaking ice.

Through windows and doorways, Derek glimpsed the remaining survivors. One barricaded herself in the pharmacy backroom. A family piled furniture against their front door. Old Mack fired his shotgun from his window, the buckshot-shattering frozen limbs that reformed seconds later.

"Help!" Bill Cooper ran past, frost crawling up his legs. He stumbled and fell, completely encased in ice when he hit the ground. Moments later, he rose, his eyes glowing an eerie blue.

The infected moved as one, leaving trails of crystalline frost

that spread across buildings, vehicles, and power lines. The air temperature plummeted further. Derek's breath came in visible clouds that turned to falling ice crystals.

Screams echoed from the community center as frost crept under doors and through ventilation systems. The backup generator sputtered and died as ice consumed it. As the infection spread, lights went dark across town one by one.

Derek sprinted down an alley, the infected's synchronized footsteps following close behind. Mary and Jimmy's frozen forms led the pursuit, their movements unnaturally precise. Each minute, more townspeople fell, becoming part of the growing group of ice-covered figures.



Derek crashed through the back door of the geology lab, slamming it behind him. He grabbed a metal shelf and dragged it across the entrance. Ice crystals had already crept under the doorframe.

"Who's there?" A woman's voice called from deeper in the building.

"Derek Lawson. Don't shoot - I'm still human."

Dr. Maria Kwon emerged behind a row of specimen cases, clutching a leather-bound journal. Dark circles ringed her eyes. "The old park ranger? Thank god. I've been trying to reach someone since this started."

"What is this? The whole town's turning into-"

"Ice zombies?" She flipped open the journal, revealing sketches of crystalline formations. "It's not zombies. It's the Frostheart. Hannah and I found it last week during the glacier core sampling."

Derek spotted Hannah's frozen form through the window, leading an infected group down the street. "Hannah was working with you?"

"She was my research assistant." Maria's hands trembled as she turned pages. "We discovered something in the ice - an artifact."

Ancient. But it wasn't just frozen there. It was deliberately sealed away."

Frost spread across the lab's windows. The temperature dropped sharply.

"There's another one," Maria continued, her voice whispering as her fingers traced the journal's weathered pages. "In Colorado. They found a similar one a month ago, buried deep in a mountain cave, but couldn't contain it. The military tried to quarantine the area, a ski resort, but it was too late. It's a weapon - a pathogen engineered to freeze its hosts. Whoever created it knew exactly what they were doing."

"How do we stop it?"

"Hannah and I theorized..." Maria pulled out a stone tablet covered in ice-blue crystals. "The artifact - the Frostheart stone - acts as a catalyst. Destroy it, and the pathogen loses its ability to spread. Hannah was supposed to take it to a secure facility, but-"

The infected burst through the door, shelving crashing aside. Hannah led them, her crystalline form reflecting the lab's fluorescent lights.

"The stone," Maria shoved the tablet into Derek's hands. "You have to destroy it before-"

Frost crackled toward Maria's leg. She twisted away, shoving Derek desperately toward the exit. "Run! Get out!"

✱

As Derek and Maria stumbled through the blizzard, the howling winds conjuring memories he'd rather forget, he couldn't help but think about the last time he'd been caught in a storm like this. It had been years ago, when he was still a park ranger, before Frosthaven became a ghost town before the streets emptied and hope drained away like springtime snowmelt.

He'd begged his family not to drive the past that day, his instincts screaming danger. But they insisted on visiting her

parents in Anchorage for her birthday. He remembered their final wave - Sarah's auburn hair flying, little Emma pressing her mitten to the window, drawing a heart in the fog of her breath.

The avalanche had come without warning, triggered by an unnatural seismic event deep within the earth. It was later determined that it wasn't an ordinary snow slide; something else had been at play that day. The town mourned with him as they dug through feet of snow and ice, but it was useless. His wife and child were lost to him forever. The search teams worked for weeks, their faces growing grimmer with each passing day, until finally, the mayor pulled him aside and told him they had to stop.

Derek clutched the Frostheart stone as he trudged through deep snow toward the peak where Hannah's team had made their discovery. Its weight reminded him of failing to protect his loved ones from nature - or whatever evil force now lurked below. The stone's alien coldness seeped through his gloves into his bones, whispering secrets he dreaded to hear.

His and Maria's boots crunched in the snow, each step echoing his failure. The guilt and the stone weighed equally heavy, constant reminders of his powerlessness against what lay beneath.

"Where are we going?" asked Maria, her voice muffled by the thick scarf wrapped around her face.

He knew it was irrational, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he should have done more, that his skills as a park ranger should have been enough to save them, and none of the years of wilderness training or the countless rescue operations he'd led had mattered. Every life he'd saved in the past seemed to mock him now, reminding him of the ones he couldn't protect when it truly counted.

The wind howled around them, whipping the snow into swirling eddies that obscured his vision and chilled him to the bone. But Derek welcomed the biting cold as if it could numb the pain in his heart. He had isolated himself in Frosthaven not just because it was all he knew anymore; it was also penance for his

perceived failures. The ghost town's empty cabins and crumbling infrastructure were a constant reminder of what he'd lost and could never regain. Each creaking board and loose shingle was another mark in his ledger of regret.

As they approached the Cryslix Glacier, where Hannah's team had made their discovery, Maria stumbled into him, gasping. Derek paused, momentarily forgetting his self-hatred to check on her. He dusted the snow from her parka and forced an encouraging smile. "We're almost there," he lied, knowing they faced another hour of harsh climbing.

They pressed on through the storm, moving steadily. Derek remembered better days: campfires under starlit skies, laughter bouncing off snow, and wild sled rides down hills. These memories were his only remnants, frozen like Frosthaven itself in grief and guilt. Sometimes, when aurora lit the sky at night, he could almost believe those days still existed...

The wind's howl shifted, triggering a memory Derek had buried deep. The sound matched the helicopter rotors from that day in the Kenai Mountains—his last rescue mission. Three climbers trapped in a crevasse, standard extraction protocol—until it wasn't.

He flexed his hands, phantom rope burns stinging his palms. The lead climber had panicked and thrashed against the safety line—equipment failure. Bodies falling. Radio static. Blood on snow.

"You okay?" Maria's voice cut through the flashback.

Derek blinked away the images. His breath came in sharp bursts, visible in the frigid air. "Fine."

But he wasn't acceptable. Hadn't been since that day. The isolation of Frosthaven had seemed like salvation at first - no more lives in his hands, no more split-second decisions that could end in death. Just empty cabins and broken pipes need fixing. Simple. Safe.

He trudged through knee-deep snow, each step an effort against the growing storm. What was the point of it all? The town was dying, and most residents were long gone. Yet here he stayed,

maintaining buildings no one would ever live in again, fixing things that would eventually rust and rot anyway.

The question haunted him daily: Why keep going? Sarah and Emma were gone, and his rescue career ended in tragedy. Even this god-forsaken town was nothing but a hollow shell. He had no answer; it was just the mechanical survival routine—wake up, work, sleep, and repeat.

"We should rest," Maria called out.

Derek shook his head. Rest meant thinking and remembering—the helicopter's whine, the snapping rope, the radio crackling with final screams. It was better to keep moving, to exhaust himself until sleep came without dreams.

The wind died down momentarily, leaving Derek alone with his thoughts. He watched Maria trudge ahead through the snow. Her determined steps a stark contrast to his hesitation. Why keep going? The question echoed in his mind like the hollow wind whistle through Frosthaven's abandoned buildings.

Derek trudged through the deepening snow, each step a reminder of nature's indifference. The wind whipped around him, its icy fingers stealing warmth and life with the same ruthless efficiency it had shown when it claimed Sarah and Emma. He glanced at Maria, her determined steps cutting through the snow ahead of him. Her presence nagged at him, stirring a long-forgotten sense of purpose. Maybe there was still a reason to keep going, not for himself, but for others. To use what he'd learned from his failures to keep them safe. The thought terrified him almost as much as it gave him hope.

His boots crunched through the crusty surface layer of snow. Each step felt heavier than the last, weighed down by years of guilt. But something about Maria's presence nagged at him. Her determination reminded him of Sarah - that stubborn refusal to give up even when the odds seemed impossible.

"Watch your step here." The words left his mouth before he realized he'd spoken. Maria nodded, carefully picking her way

around a hidden ice patch he'd spotted. The simple act of warning her, of potentially preventing harm, stirred something he thought long dead.

"Thanks." She smiled, and for a brief moment, the walls he'd built around himself cracked.

Maybe there was still a purpose - not redemption, but a chance to do better. To use what he'd learned from his failures to keep others safe. The thought terrified him almost as much as it gave him hope.

"I know these mountains," Derek said, surprising himself again with the need to share. "Been up here more times than I can count. Before everything... before I lost them."

Maria slowed her pace to walk beside him. Her silence wasn't the awkward kind he'd grown used to in town - it was patient, inviting.

The words tumbled out like loose rocks down a mountainside. "Sometimes I think staying here is just slow suicide. But then..."

"But then someone needs help," Maria finished for him.

Derek nodded, throat tight. Maybe that kept him going - not hope for himself, but the chance to spare others from the pain he knew too well.



A flash of movement caught Derek's eye - a figure stumbling through the snow with an unnatural gait. The shape emerged from behind a frost-covered boulder, skin pale as the surrounding ice.

"Hannah?" Maria's voice cracked.

The figure's head snapped toward them, revealing glazed eyes and blue-tinged flesh. What had been Hannah lurched forward, frost crackling across her skin with each jerky movement?

"That's not Hannah anymore." Derek grabbed Maria's arm, pulling her back as more shapes emerged from the white-out conditions. He recognized Tom from the general store, his usually

cheerful face now a mask of frozen malice. Behind him, the Peterson twins moved in perfect, terrible unison, their skin reflecting the glacier's crystalline sheen.

"We need to move. Now." Derek's survival instincts kicked in as the group of ice-transformed townspeople advanced.

Hannah's mouth opened in a silent scream. Her breath was visible not as warm vapor but as crystalline mist. She launched herself forward with inhuman speed.

Derek shoved Maria aside as Hannah's frozen fingers slashed through the air where they'd stood. The others spread out, trying to circle them against the glacier's edge.

"The research station," Maria gasped between breaths as they backed away. "It's our only chance."

Xombie twins moved with disturbing coordination, their movements precise despite their frozen state. Derek's mind raced - these weren't mindless zombies, but something worse. Something that retained just enough intelligence to hunt effectively.

Hannah's arm shot out, spreading ice from her fingertips. Instantly, the ground where Maria had stood froze over. They scrambled backward, the crunch of snow beneath their feet echoing off the glacier's face.

More figures emerged from the storm—faces Derek recognized from town, all transformed by whatever had taken Hannah. Their skin glittered with ice crystals, and their movements were jerky but purposeful as they closed in.

"Run!" Derek grabbed Maria's hand, pulling her toward the only gap in the closing circle of ice-covered bodies.

He ripped a rusted pipe from the ice near the station, swinging it at Hannah's icicle fingers. The impact shattered them, scattering crystalline shards. But where they landed, ice spread, each shard pulsing blue as it spawned new growth—beautiful and terrifying.

"The cold's making them stronger!" Maria kicked Tom in the chest, sending him staggering back. His torso cracked but didn't break, the ice reforming instantly.

"Behind you!"

The Peterson twins grabbed Maria's jacket. She slipped out of it as the ice began crawling up the fabric. Derek smashed his pipe into one twin's face, but the metal stuck fast, frozen solid. He released it as frost crept toward his gloves.

Blood trickled from a cut on Maria's cheek, freezing before it could drip. The temperature around them plummeted as more transformed townspeople emerged from the whiteout.

"There's too many!" Derek's muscles burned from the cold and exertion. His breath came in ragged gasps that crystallized in front of his face.

Hannah's broken fingers had regrown into jagged ice daggers. She slashed across Derek's arm, tearing through his winter coat. Numbness spread from the wound as frost formed on his sleeve.

Maria screamed. The Peterson twins had her pinned against the glacier wall, ice creeping up her legs. Derek fought through the growing crowd, but frozen hands grabbed his shoulders, arms, and legs. Tom's face appeared inches from his, exhaling that strange crystalline mist.

"Let go!" Derek thrashed against their grip, but each touch spread more ice across his clothes, weighing him down. His movements became sluggish as the cold penetrated deeper.

Maria's legs were encased entirely now, the ice climbing higher. Her struggles weakened as the transformation began. The crowd of ice-changed townspeople pressed closer, their combined presence dropping the temperature to impossible levels.

Derek's vision blurred as frost crept across his eyelashes. The last thing he saw was Hannah's frozen smile as darkness took him.

Derek's frozen fingers clenched the Frostheart stone, its crystalline glow pulsating in rhythm with the eerie blue light in the Xombies' eyes. The icy burn spread up his arm, numbing his hand, but he didn't let go. One of them had to make it out alive.

"Maria!" he shouted, wrenching the stone from his pocket. His sleeve cracked audibly as frost snapped across its fibers. "Catch!"

The stone gleamed like a shard of alien fire as it arced through the air. Maria lunged, narrowly escaping the Peterson twins' grasp. She hit the snow hard, rolling just in time to clutch the glowing artifact against her chest.

"Go! Take it!" Derek roared, spinning to meet Tom's frozen lunge. His fist slammed into the Xombie's crystalline face, shattering it into jagged shards.

"Not without you!" Maria's voice cracked with panic as she scrambled to her feet.

"Now!" Derek's bellow echoed like thunder across the frozen wasteland. He charged into the horde, slamming his shoulder into Hannah as she leapt for Maria. The two crashed into the snow, Hannah's clawed hands tearing into his chest. Pain flared as frost spread across his torso, biting deep into his flesh.

"Run!" he gasped, gripping Hannah with what strength remained. Her jagged fingers raked his face, leaving trails of blood that froze instantly.

Maria hesitated for a moment, her eyes wide with horror. Then she turned and bolted toward the snowmobile, the Frostheart clutching tightly against her. Derek's struggles faded behind her, swallowed by the growing storm.

Maria clutched the stone and sprinted toward the research station's snowmobile. The engine roared to life as Derek fought against the growing numbness in his limbs.

More transformed townspeople emerged from the storm, but Derek planted himself between them and Maria's escape route. Ice crystals spread across his skin with each impact, each grabbed limb, each slash of frozen claws.

The snowmobile's engine faded into the distance, clouding Derek's vision with frost. His movements grew sluggish, and his joints stiffened as the cold penetrated deeper.

Hannah's face appeared before him, those familiar features now twisted into something inhuman. His warmth faded as frozen hands dragged him down into the snow.

Maria gunned the snowmobile's throttle, the wind whipping tears from her eyes. The stone pulsed against her chest where she'd tucked it inside her thermal layer. Each flash of blue light matched the rhythm of her racing heart.

The storm raged harder, but she kept the machine pointed south toward the research station where Dr. Chen worked. Her fingers ached from gripping the handles, knuckles white beneath her gloves. She didn't dare look back at Frosthaven, at what remained of Derek and the others.

Derek's final shout echoed in her mind, drowning out the snowmobile's engine. The image of ice crawling across his face burned behind her eyes. He'd given everything to get her and the stone out. The weight of his sacrifice pressed down on her chest, heavier than the arctic cold.

The stone's light grew stronger, seeping through her clothes. Its crystalline surface felt warm against her skin - the only warmth left in this frozen wasteland. Whatever it was, whatever it had done to the townspeople, she had to find a way to destroy it.

The research station's lights appeared through the whiteout—dim beacons in the growing darkness. Maria steered toward them, her muscles tense with the fear that more ice-changed people might emerge from the storm. But she was alone on the endless white plain, carrying the last hope of stopping this thing from spreading beyond Frosthaven.

"I'll find a way," she whispered, the words lost to the wind. "I promise, Derek. Your sacrifice won't be for nothing."

The stone pulsed again, stronger this time. Maria pressed her hand against it through her jacket, feeling its alien warmth. Dr. Chen would know what to do. He had to. She couldn't let Derek's last act of courage go to waste.

The research station grew more prominent, its walls a dark slash against the white landscape. Maria guided the snowmobile

toward the entrance, her determination hardening like ice in her veins. She would find a way to end this, no matter the cost.

Maria shoved the station doors open, the freezing metal biting her palms even through her gloves. She slammed them shut behind her, but the crunch of frost underfoot told her she wasn't alone. Her breath hitched as three figures emerged from the shadows, their jagged, ice-covered forms glinting menacingly under the fluorescent lights. The Frostheart stone burned against her chest, its rhythmic pulses growing faster, echoing the pounding of her heart.

She sprinted down the hallway toward the lab, the Xombies' footsteps crunching behind her. Frost spread across the walls in their wake, crackling like breaking glass. The corridor temperature plummeted.

"Almost there." Maria rounded the corner into the central lab. The industrial furnace loomed against the far wall - the same one Dr. Chen used to test material tolerances in extreme heat. Her frozen fingers fumbled with the control panel.

A cold hand grabbed her shoulder. She spun, driving her elbow into the Xombie's face. Ice chips scattered across the floor. The creature stumbled back, its features a twisted mask of Derek's neighbor Sarah.

The furnace hummed to life. Maria yanked the stone from her jacket. Its blue light filled the room, drawing the Xombies closer like moths to flame.

"This ends now." She slammed her palm against the furnace door release. Heat blasted her face as it swung open.

The nearest Xombie lunged. Maria ducked under its grasp and hurled the stone into the furnace's glowing maw. The crystal hit the heating element with a crack.

Blue light exploded outward. The Xombies screamed - a sound like breaking icicles. Their crystalline shells began to melt, running down their bodies in rivulets of water. The stone pulsed one final time before shattering into dust.

Maria slumped against the wall, watching the Xombies collapse into puddles on the floor. Regular human flesh emerged from beneath their icy coating. They lay unconscious but breathing, their skin pink and warm.

She touched the space on her chest where the stone had rested. "We did it, Derek. We stopped it." Her whisper echoed in the sudden quiet of the lab.

The furnace's heat washed over her as she closed her eyes, exhausted. Outside, the storm began to clear.

Maria's eyes snapped open. The lab's harsh fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, and a low hum emanated from the cooling furnace. She pushed herself off the wall, the lingering heat a phantom sensation against her back.

A blinking light caught Maria's attention. Dr. Chen's computer, miraculously spared from the spreading frost, displayed a news alert flashing across the screen. "Xombie outbreak confirmed in London. Reports of similar incidents..." The headline was replaced by a grainy video of ice-covered figures swarming Piccadilly Circus.

Another alert blinked onto the screen. "Rio de Janeiro reports widespread Xombie attacks." A picture showed Christ the Redeemer statue partially encased in glimmering ice, a lone figure dangling from its outstretched hand, crystalline skin reflecting the sunset.

"Tokyo... Sydney... Moscow..." Each new alert chimed like a death knell. Locations flashed across the screen, accompanied by chilling images of frozen chaos. Xombies surged through city streets, their icy forms forming a terrifying tide that engulfed everything in their path.

"No..." Maria whispered, her hand flying to her mouth. Frosthaven hadn't been an isolated incident. This... this was global. The furnace behind her groaned, a metallic sigh in the face of the burgeoning horror unfolding on the screen. The stone she destroyed... it wasn't the source. It was just a piece—a catalyst.

A wave of despair washed over her, threatening to drag her under. Derek's sacrifice, her desperate flight... had it all been for nothing. The chilling realization settled in her bones, colder than the arctic wind. The fight wasn't over. It had just begun.

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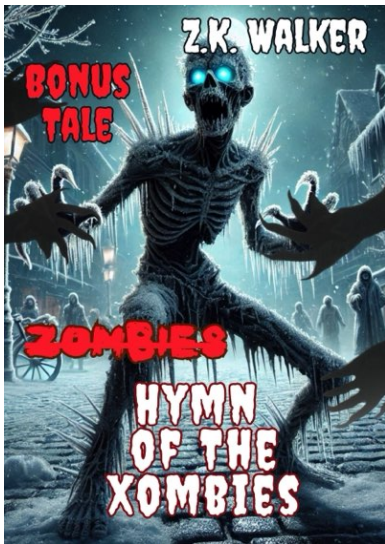
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